DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 966 UD 026 157

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TITLE Attributions of Academic Success and Failure to Effort or Ability: A Comparison of Six Asian American Ethnic Groups.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting (New Orleans, LA, April 1988). For a related document, see UD 026 158.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Ability; *Academic Achievement; *Academic Failure; *Asian Americans; *Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; Vietnamese People
IDENTIFIERS Chinese People; Filipinos; Japanese People; Koreans; Southeast Asians

ABSTRACT

In some research involving Asian Americans generalizability is questionable because the group under study is composed of persons from many cultural traditions. This study looked at 2,511 4th to 11th grade American students of Asian descent all of whom were members of one of the following Asian groups: (1) Chinese; (2) Filipino; (3) Japanese; (4) Korean; (5) Vietnamese; and (6) other Southeast Asians. The Survey of Achievement Responsibility was used to assess the students' attributional choices for items concerned with academic success or failure. The choices were the following: (1) ability; (2) effort; (3) luck; and (4) ease/difficulty of task. Ethnicity and economic status differences were compared for each attribute. The Asian Americans as an aggregated group attributed academic successes and failures primarily to effort not ability, but different ethnic groups showed differing patterns of attribution. When ethnicity was paired with economic status, the combined frequency showed more attribution of success to ability in the higher economic group. The variability among Asian American groups is clear but more study is needed on variables including or in addition to culture, such as country of origin, reasons for emigrating, and generational factors in order to explain the differences. Figures and a list of references are included. (VM)

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Attributions of Academic Success and Failure to Effort or Ability: A Comparison of Six Asian American Ethnic Groups

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Mizokawa, D. T., & Ryckman, D. B. (1988, April). Attributions of academic success and failure to effort or ability: A comparison of six Asian American ethnic groups. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

UD 026 157

Attributions of Academic Success and Failure to Effort or Ability: A Comparison of Six Asian American Ethnic Groups

Differences between American and Asian cultures have been evinced in a number of ways. For example, cross-cultural differences in attributions of academic outcomes to one or more causes, such as to effort and ability, have been reported and discussed in the research literature (e.g., Stevenson, Lee, & Stigler, 1986; Holloway, Kashiwagi, Hess, & Azuma, 1986; Mordkowitz & Ginsburg, 1987; Hess, Chang, & McDevitt, 1987). That is, though Asian and American students attribute more of their academic outcomes to effort than to ability, the Asian students and their parents ascribe even more emphasis than do Americans to effort as the cause of children's academic success, typically in mathematics. On the other hand, the Americans.make more evenly distributed attributions among the possible sources, but usually ascribe more to ability than do the Asians..

The question of generalizability is important when the focus is Asian Americans because of the composition of the group. Mordkowitz and Ginsburg (1987), for example, in referring to "Asian-American students" (p. 86), described a sample of "roughly equal numbers of Chinese, Japanese and Korean youth" (p. 86). Generalizations about socialization effects may not necessarily have applied uniformly and appropriately to all their subjects.

Though these particular peoples from a geographically identifiable region of the world may be collectively called "Asian" for convenience, the rubric is no more informative than a "White" or "Caucasian" collective comprised of Swedes, Britons, Dutch, and Italians. All differ in language, culture, religion, and history,

though many in each collective share common origins. To group such diverse peoples from Asia under the rubric of Asian or Asian American may serve to mask the underlying ethnic and acculturational differences. A comprehensive comparison among the various Asian American cohorts remains to be accomplished. Problems in the selection of the unit of analysis thus obscure the important research in cross-cultural attributions that is being conducted.

However, defining the proper unit of analysis is but one methodological issue related to identification of meaningful analytical perspectives in the research on attributions. Content differences comprise another analytical problem. The increasing number of research inquiries into the socialization of attributional patterns of academic success and failure has largely ignored achievement in subject matter other than mathematics (see Ryckman & Mizokawa, 1988a). The complexity expands with the fact that much of the previous work has not made explicit any comparisons, among American subgroups, of differential attributional patterns that might be related to subject matter. Trait-by-treatment interactions between ethnicity and content may be lurking, hidden, in the extant data.

The present study therefore investigated causal attributions to effort and ability of academic success and failure in language arts as well as mathematics/science, and focuses on the American students who differ in their Asian ethnic heritage and in socioeconomic status. (See Ryckman & Mizokawa, 1988b, for related research on differences between Whites and Asian Americans as whole groups.) If differences in attribution are found to coincide with differences in ethnicity for these American students, and these differences are

separable from socioeconomic factors, then the kind of theoretical explanation proffered by Mordkowitz and Ginsburg (1987) that Asian Americans may have "an acquired resistance to academic learned helplessness" (p. 89) must be qualified by further partitioning.

The reality of cultural differences between Asian cohorts has already been noted (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 1983, 1986; Lin & Naito, 1986; Newton & Buck, 1985). Furthermore, differences between Americans (and/or Asian Americans) and Asians have been identified and discussed (e.g., Befu, 1986; Leung & Bond, 1982; Iwasaki & Lerner, 1974; Chiu, 1986). However, examination of the known Asian differences in their American descendants, a source of insight into the effects of acculturation and assimilation into a mainstream culture, remains.

Method

Subjects

The 2,511 subjects for this study were selected from approximately 15,000 students in grades 4 to 11 who had participated in an "Effective Schools Project" evaluation for the Seattle Public Schools in June of 1984. In the sample, 1,082 students paid for lunches and 1,429 received free or reduced-price lunches under federal guidelines. The subjects, all of whom were Americans or permanent residents, were members of one of six groups: Chinese (n = 836), Filipino (n = 562), Japanese (n = 232), Korean (n = 166), Vietnamese (n = 344), and other Southeast Asian (n = 371). The widely variant cell sizes were tolerated because of the robustness of the statistical analyses applied and the fact that for all groups the

sample was the de facto population of the school district. The practice of discarding data to form more balanced cells was therefore rejected.

Instrumentation

The *Survey of Achievement Responsibility* (SOAR) is a 40-item group-administered questionnaire for assessing a student's causal attributions for success and failure in specific school-achievement situations. The items on the SOAR are equally divided between success and failure situations, each success item paired with a failure item but dispersed randomly within the instrument.

Weiner's (1976) attributional model is the basis for the four attributional choices to each success or failure multiple-choice item: ability, effort, luck, and task ease/difficulty. The student attributes a success or failure outcome described in the item stem to one of four causes that he or she perceives to be the best explanation for that success or failure. The aggregated scores yield subscales—e.g., the responses for the math/science success situation items are summed into scores for each of the four causal attributions—for a total of 24 subscales: two outcomes (one success, one failure) by three content-area subjects (language arts, math/science, physical education) by the four causal attributions. The language arts and the math/science scales used for the present study had eight item replications apiece; the maximum score for each of these two scales was 8. Because only these two content scales and two of the four possible attributions were examined for the present study, only 8 of the 24 subscale scores were analyzed—the two effort and ability attributions for each of the following four conditions: 1) math/science success situations, 2) math/science failure situations,

3) language arts success situations, and 4) language arts failure situations. Reliabilities and validity for the SOAR have been reported elsewhere (see Ryckman, Sprague, & Peckham, 1985).

The instrument permits only one of four possible attributions to be made for any item; thus, the four subscales within each situation would not be statistically independent of each other if all the choices are treated as separate outcome variables. However, analysis of only the effort and ability attributions, aggregated over the eight replications like the scoring of a unidimensional Likert scale, removed these statistical constraints.

Procedures

As an element of the district-wide "Effective Schools Project" assessment, classroom teachers administered the SOAR. Students were told that all data files would be coded to preserve confidentiality. Due to scheduling difficulties, twelfth-grade students had already completed school before the administration date. For all students in grades 4 through 6, and older students with suspected reading difficulties, teachers read the items orally. All other students read the SOAR silently.

Results

Each analysis of variance with repeated measures examined three predictor variables—the two within-subject independent variables of content area (language arts or math/science) and outcome (success or failure situation) and the between-subject moderator variables of student ethnicity (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese,

Korean, Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asian) and lunch status (subsidized or not). This statistical design was applied separately to each of the two dependent variables: the frequency of attributions to 1) effort and 2) ability.

Generally, the frequency of attributions to effort exceeded those to ability for these Asian American groups. The cell means of attributions to effort ranged between 4.015 and 4.721, whereas the means for ability attributions ranged between 1.491 and 1.721. However, the more compelling findings appear when ethnicity is varied within the general Asian American class.

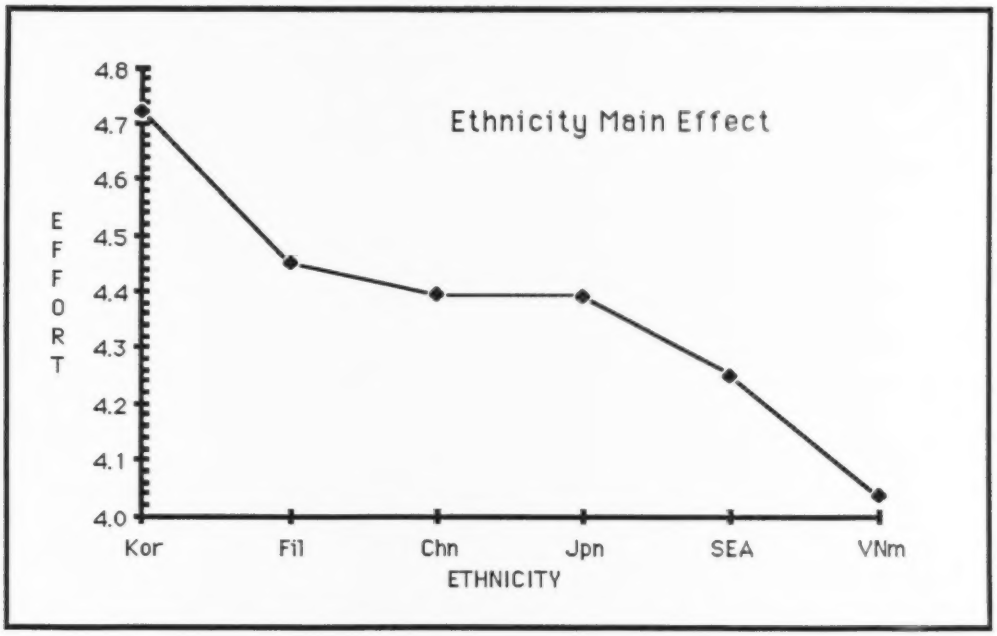
Effort

Content and outcome were significant main effects. Overall, language arts situations (M = 4.445) resulted in greater attributions to effort than did math/science situations (M = 4.265), F (1, 2499) = 15.1, $p < .001$; and success outcomes (M = 4.696) were attributed significantly more to effort than were failure outcomes to a lack of effort (M = 4.015), F (1, 2499) = 48.6, $p < .001$. The main effect of outcome was expected because it replicates findings from other research. The finding of a content effect, however, reflects the added importance of distinguishing academic domains in research on attributions.

Ethnicity (the variable of primary interest) appeared as a significant main effect, F (5, 2499) = 3.3, $p < .01$. Koreans attributed the most to effort (M = 4.721) and Southeast Asians (other than Vietnamese) the least (M = 4.036); see Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Effect of Ethnicity on Attributions to Effort



Ethnicity also appeared in significant interactions, yielding a complex view of its role in attribution models. This variety of interactions involving ethnicity demonstrates how a more precise definition of the unit of analysis may yield rich results. Other research, including the companion study by Ryckman and Mizokawa (1988b), may have found effects linked to "Asian Americans" as a single ethnic group, but may have overlooked any ethnic patterns distinguishing the various Asian American groups from each other.

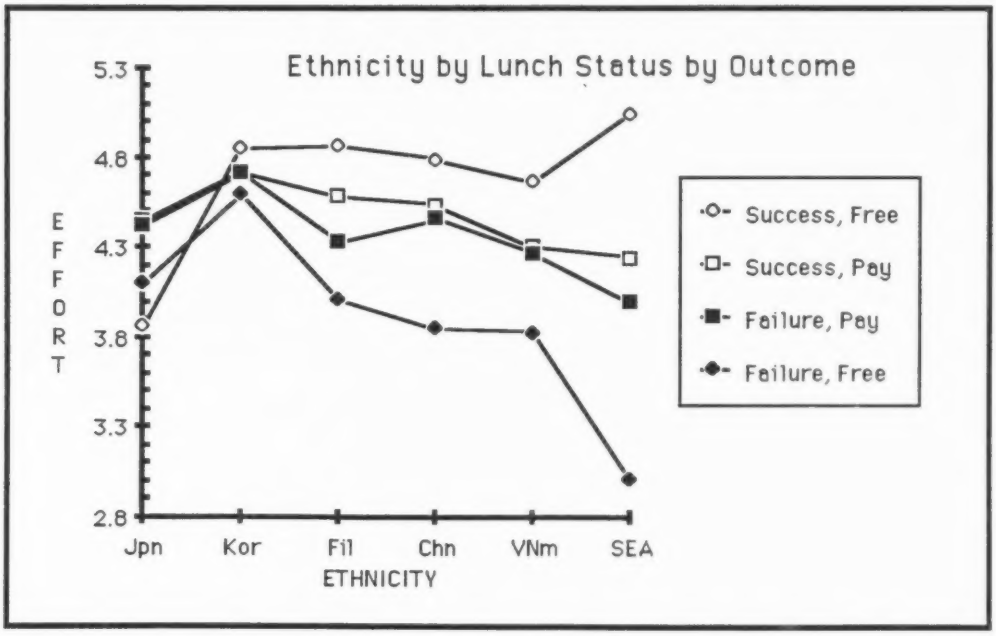
Ethnicity interacted significantly with content, F (5, 2499) = 2.9, $p < .01$. The six ethnic groups each attributed more effort to language arts situations than to math/science situations, but the Koreans' attributions to math/science (M = 4.488) were at the level of most other groups' attributions to language arts, and their language arts effort level (M = 4.955) was the highest of all groups. The mean attributions to effort in math/science and language arts situations, respectively, were, in descending order by ethnic group: Koreans 4.488, 4.955; Filipinos 4.369, 4.531; Japanese 4.250, 4.530; Chinese 4.314, 4.474; Vietnamese 4.208, 4.294; and other Southeast Asians 3.962, 4.109.

The ethnicity by outcome interaction was also significant, F (5, 2499) = 7.5, $p < .01$. All groups except the Japanese attributed more effort to success outcomes than failure outcomes; the Japanese were about evenly distributed (a difference of .004). The range of differences for the non-Japanese groups was between .117 (Korean) and 1.891 (other Southeast Asians), with Filipinos, Chinese, and Vietnamese between the two, in that order. The other Southeast Asians' attributions of effort had a mean of 4.91 to success and a mean of 3.090 to failure, despite the showing of the second to lowest overall attributions to effort as a main effect.

Finally, the ethnicity variable also interacted with lunch status and outcome, F (5, 2499) = 4.9, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2). Those who paid for their lunches were fairly evenly apportioned on attributions to effort for success and failure outcomes. On the other hand, those receiving partial or full lunch

Figure 2.

Effect of the Interaction between Ethnicity, Lunch Status, and Outcome on Attributions to Effort

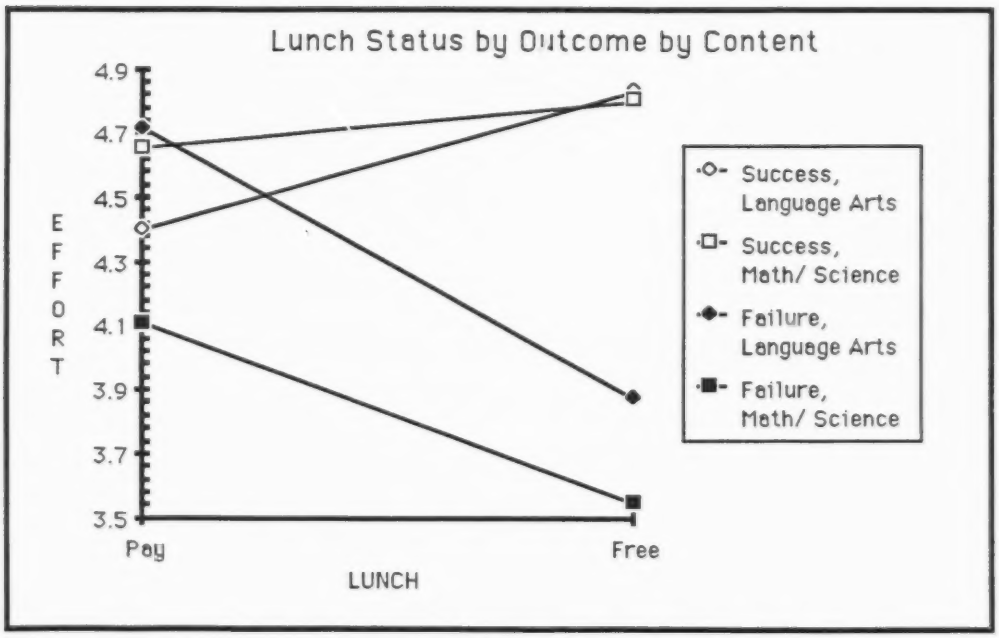


subsidies generally attributed more to effort for success outcomes than for failures. Two exceptions appeared. First was the Japanese students with lunch supports—they were somewhat undifferentiated between success and failure attributions of effort, but their levels were lower than most of those who paid for lunches. The second exception was the Koreans, who were undifferentiated on all points.

The lunch status by content by outcome interaction was also significant, F (5, 2499) = 16.9, $p < .001$. In math/science situations, attributions to effort were greater for success outcomes than failure outcomes whether or not the student received a lunch subsidy. However, students receiving free or reduced-price lunches clearly believed more that success in both content areas was the result of effort expenditures than they believed that failure was attributable to a lack of application of effort (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Effect of the Interaction between Lunch Status, Outcome, and Content on Attributions to Effort



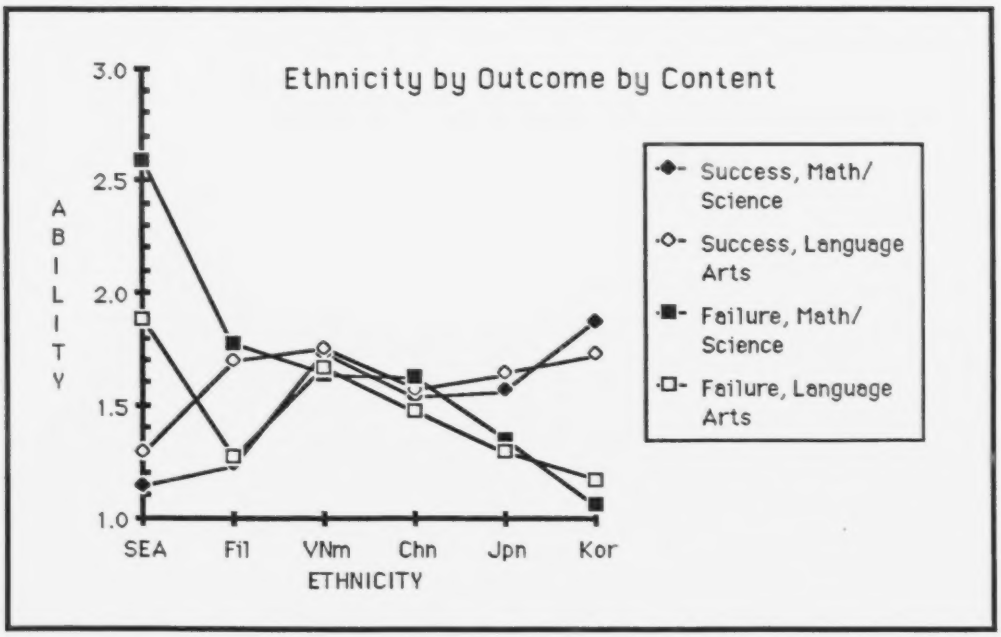
This finding must be allied with the ability attributions (described more fully in the following section), showing two related patterns: 1) an ethnicity main effect with students on lunch subsidies attributing significantly more to ability than paying students and 2) a lunch status by outcome interaction, indicating that the more financially needy student believed that lack of ability leads to failure more than high ability leads to success, while the paying student believed the opposite—ability explained success more than failure. Taken together, the economically disadvantaged Asian American student seems to find value in working hard to achieve successes in either of the academic domains, but limited ability might be considered to place a ceiling on success. (Note, in Figure 2, that while the various groups differ in degree, they have the same patterns except for the Japanese.)

Ability

Ethnicity appeared in significant interactions with outcome (F (5, 2499) = 7.1, $p < .001$) and with outcome by content (F (1, 2499) = 7.6, $p < .001$; see Figure 4 for an illustration of the latter interaction). In general, the Japanese and Korean students attributed more success than failure to ability, though Koreans attributed even less of failure to ability than did the Japanese. The Chinese and Vietnamese students evenly attributed success and failure in math/science and language arts to ability, though the Vietnamese overall attributed more to ability than the Chinese, and tended to attribute ability more to successes than to failures while the Chinese had the opposite tendency.

Figure 4.

Effect of Interaction between Ethnicity, Outcome, and Content on Attributions to Ability



Unique as each group appeared to be despite some general similarities, the other Southeast Asians had dramatically different profiles, especially when contrasted with the Koreans. Failures in both language arts and math/science were largely attributed to a lack of ability; still, successes were not attributed to ability. The Koreans, on the other hand, attributed their successes in both content areas to their ability, but their failures were not attributed to a lack of ability. Of all the Asian American groups, the Koreans attributed the most overall to effort, as already seen in Figure 1. Their attribution of successes generally to ability

more than their attributions of failure to a lack in their ability, even when compared to other Asian American groups, combines with their major effort attributions to round out a view of academic life that seems the most positive and optimistic in outlook.

Students receiving lunch subsidies made significantly more attributions to ability than did those who paid for their lunches, F (1, 2499) = 3.7, $p < .05$. Further, students who paid for lunches attributed success more than failures to ability, while those on lunch supports believed failure was more a result of (lack of) ability than they success was, F (2, 2499) = 34.1, $p < .01$. This disordinal interaction was amplified by a lunch status by outcome by content interaction, F (1, 2499) = 5.8, $p < .02$. Also, those receiving lunch subsidies made ability attributions more frequently in math/science situations (M = 1.712) than in language arts situations (M - 1.556) but the reverse was true for those paying for lunches (M = 1.460 and 1.523, respectively), F (1, 2499) = 10.0, $p < .001$.

Overall, then, Asian American students with fewer economic resources seem to believe that ability—an internal, stable, and uncontrollable source—has a greater effect in math/science failure situations than those who have more resources. This pessimistic view is largely offset by the fact of the financially needy students believing even more than paying students in the role of effort as a cause of academic successes (see Figure 3). Against the odds, the Asian American child of poverty thus seems to exhibit what Mordkowitz and Ginsburg (1987) described as "resistance to learned helplessness" (p. 89).

Discussion

The general finding, consonant with the generalizations of prior research by others, was that Asian Americans as an aggregated group attributed academic successes and failures primarily to effort, not ability (see also Ryckman & Mizokawa, 1988, for results on a global comparison between Asian Americans as a group and Whites, with socioeconomic status controlled). However, each of the six Asian American ethnic groups studied showed differing patterns of attributions. Ethnic distinctions appeared when a variety of contrasts was investigated: success and failure outcomes, math/science and language arts content, and socioeconomic status. Indeed, it seemed that socioeconomic status paired with ethnicity produced the typical findings of more attributions to effort for success outcomes, but only for the students who received lunch subsidies. Generalizations about "Asian Americans" therefore may not be very meaningful, despite the obvious methodological and statistical convenience of classifying all Americans with Asian ancestry into a single category. The unit of analysis should be more precisely defined.

How the definitions should be framed is still unclear, particularly with regard to specification of what variables to study. The variability among the Asian American groups is evident. What remains mysterious is the nature of the variables—including or in addition to culture—that might aid in explaining the differences. Several approaches might be taken. Explanatory variables may be partly comprised of some of the following:

1. Country of origin. These differences have been commonly called cultural or national differences when international comparisons have been drawn; often, they are called ethnic differences when intranational comparisons are being made. Some note might be taken of the fact that studies have discovered cross-national differences that might have both short- and long-term influences for Asian American descendants.

Bond and Cheung (1983), for example, reported that Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese responses to an open-ended self-concept instrument differed; on some particulars, the Japanese showed more negative responses than the Chinese. In a series of reports on a multinational study, Hofstede (1980, 1983, 1986) noted distinctive profiles and/or national clusters for data collected from over 50 countries. If the countries of origin differ on cultural variables, Americans of Asian descent might be expected to differentiate themselves similarly.

2. Cultural-temporal distance from country of origin. Are Asian Americans different from Asians because of the American cultural context? One series of studies (McDevitt, Hess, & Chang, 1986; Hess, Chang, & McDevitt, 1987) comparing Chinese (from the People's Republic of China), Chinese American, and White American mothers and their sixth-grade children noted that observed attributional differences between the two Chinese groups may be a function of the effect of American culture on the American Chinese. In attributions to failure, PRC mothers attributed the cause to effort more than the other two groups of mothers, but Chinese American mothers gave more effort causes than the White American mothers. Their children followed the same

pattern. (See also Arkoff, Meredith, & Iwahara, 1962, for an early study on dominance and deference in Japanese, Japanese American, and White American students.)

Studies of generational differences are illuminating of factors which seem to persist, to be acquired, or to be modified with longevity in America, the adopted country have been reported in the literature for some time. Studies by Masuda, Hasegawa, and Matsumoto (1973) and Meredith (1965), for instance, are among a few showing differences between immigrants and several generations of their American descendants.

3. Original reasons for emigration from the home country, which might be considered to be distinct from reasons for immigration to the new country. Laborers emigrating from Japan may have had common economic goals, but the reasons for their choice of Brazil or America as their destination may have some bearing on their subsequent lives in their adopted countries. In an analysis of the Chinese experience, Wong (1985) described the family structures of Chinese who immigrated to New York City, compared to Chinese in Lima, Peru, and in Manila, the Philippines. The circumstances surrounding immigration to the new location have made a noticeable difference in family life. Both emigration and immigration factors come into play in an attempt to understand the Asian American differences.

Nicassio (1983, 1985) described how groups of Southeast Asians have been identified with severe depression disorder and alienation. They have been placed under extreme conditions of stress, many having left their country

involuntarily. The component groups that Nicassio studied (Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians) all manifested differing profiles. Just as "Asian Americans" is too global to be truly meaningful, so is the category of "Southeast Asians". Even in the present study, however, the only differentiated Southeast Asian group was the Vietnamese because the school district's ethnicity reporting policy resulted in the classifications used in this set of data.

4. Cultural support in America. Even with a more precise identification of, for example, Chinese Americans as being different from Japanese Americans, problems of over-generalization may still exist. People differ in the extent of the larger social support of their cultural origins. A third-generation Korean American living in Seattle's International District might be culturally quite different from a third-generation Korean American living in Evansville, Indiana, even if both had ancestors leaving the same village in Korea at the same time. Serrie's (1985) review of ethnographic studies of Chinese communities in China and abroad noted both the constancy and the flexibility of community organizations that have persisted since ancient times. Other Asian communities, however, may not have the same support networks; indeed, even among Chinese Americans, geographic location, still another factor, may determine the existence of such community support groups.

5. Other variables: a) Geographic location or place of residence might be an important factor, as previously discussed. In an analysis of differences between Japanese Americans in Hawaii and those living on the mainland, several reports have noted cultural, social, generational, and psychological differences

(e.g., Mizokawa, 1981; Masuda, et al., 1973). b) Body image is another possibility. For example, Pang, Mizokawa, Morishima and Olstad (1985) found ethnic differences in body image between Japanese American youth and their White American peers. Iwasaki and Lerner (1974) studied body-build stereotypes cross-culturally, between Americans and Japanese. c) Socioeconomic status may be as important a factor to analyze or include in an analysis as ethnicity. Gelb and Mizokawa (1986), for instance, discovered the potency of both SES and ethnicity in the prediction and understanding of classifications of children into mentally retarded, organically impaired, or learning-disabled categories in the 50 states.

All of these attributes or factors combine to produce a complex net of explanatory variables that may provide comprehension of the difficulty of effectively grouping Asian Americans into a single ethnic group. Were it not for the availability of data on virtually all the students in a large urban school district, such fine analyses would probably not have been conducted for this research or any other. In the usual attempts to generate large enough cell sizes, the so-called Asian American grouping, collapsing across the large number of distinct Asian and Pacific Island peoples, would probably have emerged. Asian/Pacific Americans are, in comparison to other ethnic groups, a small minority even in the aggregate. The net result of such a combination, of course, would have been a lack of distinction among distinctive groups, leading educators perhaps to over-generalize and under-distinguish much, even in realms larger than attribution theory.

Whatever the approach, whatever the framework, clarifying the unit of analysis in studies related to Asian Americans is a prerequisite. The understanding of cultural factors in patterns of causal attributions should not proceed without this clarification. Simultaneously, the delving into issues of the level of analysis—such as in studies of subject-matter differences or of differentiated effects in success and failure situations, like the variables identified in the present study—should contribute to an appreciation of the complexity of the human enterprise in academic contexts. Ultimately, no matter how complex, the more we understand about human motivation the more we may attempt to apply systematic approaches to facilitating the full actualization of human potential.

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